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IS SWINTON RIGHT?

OR,

THE TRUTH ABOUT INDULGENCES.

The battle now being waged in Boston on the "School Question" turns on the truth or falsity of the language in Swinton's "Outlines of the World's History" (page 320), where that author defines "indulgences" as sold by the representative of the Roman Catholic Church, in Germany, at the beginning of the 16th century. The language alluded to is as follows:

"These indulgences were, in the early ages of the church, remissions of the penances imposed upon persons whose sins had brought scandal upon the community. But in process of time they were represented as actual pardons of guilt, and the purchaser of indulgence was said to be delivered from all his sins."

The question is whether this definition is true or false? Whether an "indulgence," at the time and in the place of which Mr. Swinton speaks was understood to mean a remission of sins? We claim that the term was so understood, and the first witness we present to substantiate that claim is Martin Luther himself. It is well-known that this intrepid monk opposed Tetzel in a series of propositions or "theses" as they are called, and which, having committed to paper, he nailed on the door

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of the church at Wittemberg. These theses are directed against the sale of indulgences as carried on by Tetzel. The fifth of these theses reads: "The Pope has no power to remit any other penalty than that which he has imposed." In other words the Pope has no power to remit any other than the *temporal* punishment of sin, i.e., the penances inflicted by his own authority. Remember that Luther is refuting a counter-statement of Tetzel. What therefore could that counter-statement have been but the declaration that the Pope *had* power to remit not the penance merely, but the sin itself?

The seventy-eighth thesis reads: "The Pope's indulgence cannot take away the least of our daily sins—so far as the blame or offence of it is concerned." What must have been the counter-statement to this thesis but that the Pope's indulgence *was* able to accomplish that very thing and take away the blame and the offence of sin? Bear in mind that we are here dealing with an entirely unprejudiced witness so far as the tenets of Protestantism are concerned. Luther at this time was a loyal Catholic, a staunch defender of the Pope, and even of the doctrine of indulgence itself when not carried too far. These same theses abundantly establish these facts.

In addition to these theses we have Luther's letter to the Archbishop of Madgeburg, *preserved for us by Roman Catholic historians*, in which he complains of the "scandalous traffic" of Tetzel and his associates, and says that they persuade the common people "that they will be sure of salvation if they only buy their letters of plenary indulgence," and "that there is no sin which the indulgences, will not absolutely and at once efface."

Our next witness is the distinguished historian Ranke, not a Roman Catholic indeed, but one whose fairness to that sect has laid him open to the charge of writing history from a Catholic point of view, and who is frequently and favorably quoted by Roman Catholic authorities. What does Ranke say about indulgences in the 16th century? Precisely this, that the Reformation "may be said to have originated in the violent shock which Luther's

religious feelings received from the sale of indulgences," which he subsequently describes as "the doctrine of a forgiveness of sins to be had for money."

Our third witness is Cardinal Gibbons, who admits all that is necessary to admit to justify our position. In his work entitled "The Faith of Our Fathers" (p. 390), he says: "I will not deny that indulgences have been abused." On page 393, he enters into the following particulars: "John Tetzel, a dominican monk, who was appointed the chief preacher to announce the indulgence in Germany, was accused by Luther of exceeding his powers by making them subservient to his own private ends. Tetzel's conduct was *disavowed and condemned by the representative of the Holy See.* The council of Trent, which was held some time afterward, took effectual measures to put a stop to all irregularities regarding indulgences, and issued the following decree: 'Wishing to correct and amend the abuses which have crept into them, and on occasion of which this signal name of indulgences is blasphemed by heretics, the holy synod, enjoins, in general, by the present decree, that all WICKED TRAFFIC for obtaining them which has been the fruitful source of many abuses among Christian people, should be wholly abolished.'" We thus cannot ask any stronger corroboration of Swinton than this from Cardinal Gibbons himself. He practically acknowledges, and so does the Council of Trent, a "WICKED TRAFFIC" in indulgences by the hands of John Tetzel, in Germany, which gave rise to the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther.

Our last witness, for we are limited as to space, is the vicar-general of the Archdiocese of Boston, known as the Very Reverend William A. Byrne, who in a sermon on the subject of indulgences preached in St. Joseph's Church, Sept., 30th, 1888, and reported by the secular press, said: "It was the preaching of an indulgence granted by Pope Leo X. that gave Luther his first starting point in his attack on the Catholic Church. The exaggerated claims of some Dominican monks, headed

by John Tetzel, as to the efficacy of indulgences, and certain abuses attending the collection of alms (?) as a condition for gaining them, gave him a convenient and plausible pretext for repudiating certain doctrines of the church," etc.

What do we need more than the above testimony, in every instance, but one, from Roman Catholic sources, to fully justify not only the statement in Swinton's History, but almost any statement on this question to be found in any of our standard Protestant books? Indeed the more one considers the matter the more difficult he finds it to believe even in the *intelligence* of the school committee of Boston, without reference to its loyalty either to the truth or to our common schools. One is obliged to say with Mr. Edwin D. Mead, that the whole commotion at Wittemberg has no meaning, and the beginning of the Reformation no explanation, unless the doctrine of indulgences was being represented and understood substantially as Swinton says it was.

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